

The Missing Klan Room

Bizarre Theft of a Controversial Work of Art

By Paul Richard

The burglary took place between New Year's Eve and Jan. 6. Before stealing away with a haul of pointed hoods, satin robes and dolls, the thief, or perhaps thieves, who broke into the Connecticut Avenue studio of artist William Christenberry locked the door behind them.

They left a blood-red window, drawings and a neon cross, but they took 64 small objects—all components of a complex, highly controversial work of art on which the sculptor has been laboring for more than 15 years.

Christenberry, an Alabama-born professor at the Corcoran School of Art, is distraught. He is also frightened. Now, after weeks of waiting for a ransom note or clue, he has decided to go public with the story of the theft.

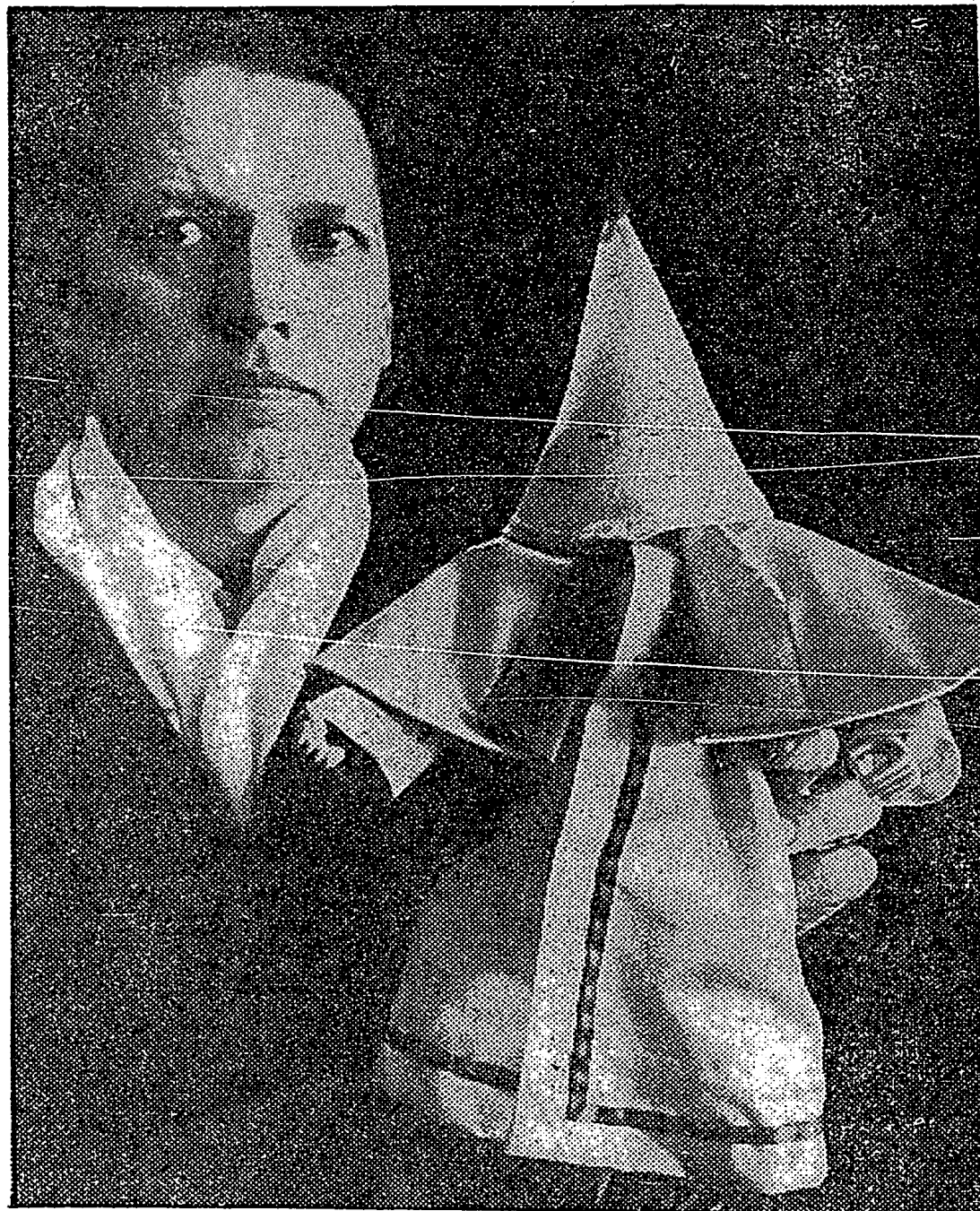
It is the subject of the stolen art that makes this case unusual. The multi-part environment that was carried off is a detailed portrayal of the rituals and costumes of the Ku Klux Klan.

Walter Hopps, a former director of the Corcoran who is now a curator at the National Collection of Fine Arts, is organizing a Christenberry retrospective for the Museum of Fine Arts of Montgomery, Ala. He believes Christenberry to be "one of Washington's most important artists," and says the stolen Klan Room may be the artist's major work — and worth as much as \$50,000.

Hopps does not suspect that profit was the motive, however.

The work was never shown, though curators from New York

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William Christenberry with a Ku Klux Klan doll, by Joel Richardson

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had come to town to see it, and officials of both the Corcoran and the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden had hoped to display it. Nor was it for sale.

"This is not a conventional art theft," Hopps said yesterday. "The thieves stole it on purpose. They went after a sequestered, unique, highly idiosyncratic work of art," said Hopps. "What could have been the motive?"

"It might have been jealousy directed against Christenberry. It might have been the action of someone who's disturbed. We know there are collectors who like forbidden objects — voodoo dolls or shrunken heads or Nazi paraphernalia. Perhaps one wished to own this portrait of the Klan. Or, perhaps the thief was angered or disturbed by the existence of the work." Another possibility, Hopps said, is that the art was stolen by the Klan itself.

"I've wracked my brain," said Christenberry yesterday, "trying to figure out who stole it — and why. They were so orderly, so precise. They didn't break the padlock. I have the only key. Perhaps they took the door off, but they didn't scratch the hinges. My greatest satisfaction would be to find out that the Klan was not involved."

"If my art was stolen by a member, or a sympathizer of the Ku Klux Klan, I've got a problem — a real problem," Christenberry said.

Meeting with the press in the office of his lawyer, Mark B. Sandground, the artist said publicity might induce the thief to change his mind, or lead to the recovery of the stolen objects. Sandground is hoping to negotiate with whomever has the contents of the Klan Room. A reward, its amount undisclosed, is being offered.

Christenberry, 42, is a photographer and sculptor whose works for many years have been frankly autobiographical. Their subject is the South, its people, hobbies, buildings, its virtues and its sins.

"Most of my photographs, most of my sculptures, celebrate the positive side of where I come from," said Christenberry. "The Klan Room stressed the negative."

"I was brought up on the Bible. I believe in good and evil. I see the Ku Klux Klan as evil."

But Christenberry knows that those who saw the room might have misjudged its message. "There is a chance that someone thought that was paying homage to the Klan."

The piece had been installed in its own locked room beside Christenberry's studio at 2625 Connecticut Ave. NW. The colored plastic on the window in daytime filled the Klan Room with red light. Twenty-six G.I. Joe dolls—all dressed in Klan robes—were arranged in the space. Seven of these dolls were arranged in a circle around a small pine coffin. Three more were incarcerated in a small barred jail the sculptor had constructed. Among the other objects stolen were a Klan parade car (covered in white satin with red trim and red sequins); a blue neon sign spelling "KKKK" (for Knights of the Ku Klux Klan); miniature bombs, guns and knives; a Klan jack-in-the-box; two authentic Klan costumes; Confederate flags, a Klan campaign button with the legend "KIGY" (for "Klansmen I Greet You") and, beside a Klan doll, dressed in miniature armor, a cigarette lighter that played Dixie and bore the legend "Forget Hell."

"The Klan Room was sheer hell," said Christenberry. "I couldn't stand it long in daylight. Gleaming on the satin the red light made me nauseous. At night, when it was lit by the white neon cross, that deathly sterile light was almost as bad."

Over the years more than 100 people—Corcoran students, Hirshhorn docents, critics and collectors—had visited Christenberry's studio and seen the Klan Room there. "The D.C. police asked me for a list of people who had seen it in the past six months. It read like a Who's Who of the Washington art world," he said.

"Though none of them condemned it to my face," he added, "I am sure that some of them found the work disturbing." At least one viewer, a black woman, a collector from Chicago, was so upset by the Klan Room that she left it in tears.

Attorney Sandground said that although fingerprints were found in the emptied Klan Room, they do not match any in the files of the Washington police. "We had a few suspicions, but our leads have not checked out. We are stymied," Sandground said.